Title: Problems of Adaptation: Ibsen, Chekhov, Pirandello and Brecht on the Bengali Stage, 1952 - 1971

Name of Scholar: Arup Shankar Misra

Supervisor: Professor Abhijit Sen

Registration no. VB 574 of 2003-04

Date of Registration: 17.04.2017

Synopsis

While we were once working on a bilingual (English and Bengali) production of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* in 2006, we faced certain inevitable questions and confusions – how far did the Bengali version of the play (Sombhu Mitra's adaptation *Putulkhela)* carry the momentum of the original, why use adaptation instead of literal translation, how far was the Bengali adaptation able to represent the aesthetic of Ibsen and so on. These questions are among those that I would want to encounter once again in the context of the adaptations of modern European plays in the Bengali theatre.

Though it is commonly accepted that experimentations with European drama on Bengali stage successfully started with the Group Theatre Movement in Bengal, its roots can actually be traced back to the very first production of a Bengali play on Bengali stage. The credit for this goes to G. S. Lebedeff who produced the Bengali translation of *The Disguise* (by Jodrell) as *Kalponik Sangbadol* in 1795. This trend of producing European plays was continued throughout the 19th and 20th century and continues even today. European plays have been used in Bengal in three different forms – translation, adaptation and usage of the dramaturgy and theatre-aesthetics, which I will discuss later. Though this trend of translation / adaptation was very popular and successful from the very first day of Bengali theatre, it reached its climax in the 1940s with the establishment of Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) and in the early post-independence period with the Group Theatre Movement. My particular area of interest is the fertile post-independence period when many prolific groups and directors were engaged in producing foreign plays one after another. Before any attempt is made to give accounts of the productions, the question that immediately needs to be addressed is why this trend reached its climax in this period and with what amount of success among the Bengali audiences.

One of the chief reasons behind this tendency was the scarcity of standard Bengali play-texts that could be performed. IPTA as well as the later theatre groups took the initiative in producing a few contemporary and old Bengali plays. Most of the pre-independence Bengali productions were based on historical or mythical themes and sometimes on social issues though without literary excellence. Theatre, in those days, was considered as a means of entertainment in time of leisure. Rabindranath Tagore tried to create a 'visible alternative', but unfortunately he remained confined to particular intellectual class of the society.

IPTA was the first to create a permanent, what may be termed as, 'theatre culture' in Bengal, just before the Independence. It purposefully used theatre as a weapon to raise mass-consciousness and bring some positive changes in society. This purpose was furthered with the formation of the autonomous groups. They provided Bengali theatre with a distinct identity both in terms of artistry and purpose. Newly formed groups like Bohurupee (1944), Ashani Chakra (1951), Shilpi Mon (1952), Sandhyaneer (1955), Gandharva (1957), Shouvanik (1957), Theatre Unit (1958), Calcutta Theatre (1959), Nandikar (1960), Rupantari (1961) and so on started producing plays with a definite ideological agenda. This inadequacy of original Bengali plays, despite a milestone like Nabanna, compelled the theatre groups into translating and adapting modern European playwrights, whose plays could be adequately appropriated for contemporary cultural articulations on the Bengali stage. Thus from *Dasachakra (The Enemy of the People*: Ibsen), *Putulkhela (A Doll's House*: Ibsen) by Bohurupee to *Natyakarer Sandhane Chhati Charitra (Six Characters in Search of an Author*: Pirandello), *ManjariAmerManjari (The Cherry Orchard*: Chekhov), *Kharir Gandi (The Caucasian Chalk Circle*: Brecht) by Nandikar – a large number of adapted plays enjoyed success on Bengali stage. Moreover, the progressive groups of theatre workers thought that exposure to the western life, art and culture through theatre would in turn enrich both the Bengali theatre practitioners and audiences, and would help them relate themselves with the worldwide socio-cultural cross-currents.

Any study of reception of dramatic text by a theatre group belonging to a different culture and language always involves analysis and scrutiny, that can tend to be subjective on the one hand, and even sketchy, on the other, for lack of adequate documentation. Despite this hurdle, keeping in view the larger theoretical concerns related to adaptation and cultural appropriation, I want to scrutinize the reception of four European dramatists – Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekhov, Luigi Pirandello and Bertolt Brecht on the Bengali stage. My analysis will include both the play text and the performance text of the translations / adaptations and also the impact of these adaptations on the ongoing Bengali theatre tradition along with some glimpses of audience responses. These dramatists have been adapted again and again from Independence until today. To keep my study within more manageable limits, I would want to analyze the plays produced between 1952 and 1971, because this was the time when this trend of adaptation of European plays seems to have peaked.

Theories about adaptation and cultural appropriation play a key role in any reception study. Julia Kristeva opines that all texts invoke and rework other texts in a rich and ever-evolving cultural mosaic. So the concept of adaptation is ever-present in all artistic works. What the Bengali groups were doing was that they were adapting the European plays into Bengali language, often transforming them into a 'Bengali play' in every sense by furnishing them with Bengali context and ideology. Using the theory of adaptation and cultural appropriation and Bakhtinian notion of chronotope as my analytical tools I would like to reassess the adapted plays produced between 1952 and 1971.

The trend of adapting European plays by the theatre groups started with the production of *Dasachakra* (1952), an adaptation of Ibsen's An Enemy of the People, by Bohurupee. Ibsen had been a constant source of adaptations and translations during this period. Many of Ibsen's plays have been reworked in Bengal not only because of their theatrical potential, but also for their social consciousness which could be readily relocated and contextualized in Bengal's socio-

political scenario. Bohurupee's next adaptation of Ibsen, *Putulkhela* (1958, from A Doll's House), was also deeply rooted in the social context. With Bulu's rejection of her apparently happy family life, Mitra called for freedom of women in India. Herbert Marshall commented on Putulkhela, "It was a perfect adaptation because the position of women in India today is still pre-Ibsen generally…" Other Ibsen-adapted productions like Nandikar's*Bidehi* (1960), *Ekti Swapner Jonyo* (1969) by Anwesha and so on also carried on with this trend.

Like Ibsen, many of Chekhov's plays like *The Proposal, The Cherry Orchard, The Wedding, The Swan Song* and so on were represented on Bengali stage, mostly with great success. Once again the trend setter was Bohurupee with their adaptation of the one-act play *The Jubilee* as *Sedin Bangalakhsmi Bank-e* in 1955. But the most popular Chekhovian adaptation was *Manjari Amer Manjari* (from *The Cherry Orchard*) by Nandikar in 1964. But the most striking relevance of the play was in its obvious hint toward the destructive powers of industrialization and capitalism that molests man and nature. Some other adaptations of Chekhov like Nandikar's*Prastab* (1960), *Nana Ronger Din* (1962) *ShuvoBibaho* (1968); Natanatyam's *Raj-jotak* (1961); Sayantani's*Birahee* (1969) had also maintained the Bengaliness quite successfully.

Though only two plays of Pirandello were adapted during this period, they were major adaptations in the history of Bengali theatre. The two plays, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and *Henry IV*, were both adapted by Nandikar under the direction of Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay as *Natyakarer Sandhane Chhati Charitra* (1961) and *Sher Afgan* (1966) respectively. In the first play, Pirandello's attack against the emptiness of bourgeois morality, social disorder, discord within the modern family relationships were successfully used in the perspective of contemporary upheavals within the socio-political condition of Bengal. Moreover, the critique of conventional theatre forms in the play had a great impact on the later experimentations with the form in Bengali theatre. The play, *Sher Afgan*, despite its apparent humour, raised uncomfortable questions about absolute notions of sanity and insanity, underscored Pirandello's insistence on the dichotomy between different approaches to 'reality'.

But among all modern European playwrights, Bertolt Brecht had the maximum impact on Bengali theatre, both in terms of content and form. The mainstream of socio-political as well as intellectual and cultural activities in the post-independence Bengal had been largely controlled by the middle class and it was this class which was among the first in India to assimilate Marxist thought and apply it to their social and cultural situation. The modern Bengali theatre had produced left-oriented plays since the time of the IPTA and many of the later groups continued that trend; their exposure to western leftist playwrights like Brecht inspired them to produce plays with Marxist outlook. Moreover, Brecht's path-breaking epic-theatre had induced the Bengali theatre practitioners to experiment with the theatrical form. During the period of my concern, Sandhyaneer produced translations of two plays of Brecht – *The Good Person of Setzuan* (1967) and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1969) and Nandikar produced *Teen Poisar Pala* (1969), an adaptation of *The Threepenny Opera*. *Teen Poisar Pala* gained much critical acclaim from Brecht scholars and theatre critics and enjoyed great success. Now,suchadaptations and appropriations invite critical scrutiny about their acceptability as well as the controlling factors behind their apparent success. The first question that may arise is which is more appealing – translation or adaptation? If a translation is used, how can the cultural difference between the source text and the translated text be resolved? Can an alien culture stir a common Bengali audience? Ajitesh once opined that art cannot be restricted by particular space and time.

This very universal appeal of art prompted the Bengali theatre groups to refashion the European plays. Through epic theatre, Brecht had tried to challenge the illusory nature of theatre and the deconstructive nature of his technique counters any concept of 'grand narrative' in theatrical tradition. But on maximum occasions in Bengal, one should admit, Brecht has become an illusion and his techniques have turned into a grand narrative itself with its lack of proper understanding. There are series of such questions, confusions and debates that may arise out of the adaptations of western works and my intention in my work is to engage with them and try to reach to some possible conclusions/solutions.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES :

1. Bristow, Eugene K, trans. and ed. *Anton Chekhov's Plays*. New York: Norton, 1977.
2. Dutta, Sunil and Sandhya De, eds. *Ajitesh Natyo Sangraha*. Kolkata: Jatiya SAhitya Parishad, 1986.
3. Meyer, Micheal, trans. and ed. *Ibsen Plays: Two*. Lanham: National Book Network, 1981.
4. Mitra, Shombhu. *Putulkhela, Dasachakra*. Kolkata: M.C.Sarkar and Sons, 1981.
5. Storer, Edward, trans. *Three Plays by Pirandello*. New York: Dover Publications, 1997.
6. Willet, John, trans. and ed. *Collected Plays : Bertolt Brecht*. London: Methuen, 1997.

SECONDARY SOURCES :

Books and Articles

1. Bandypopadhyay, Ajitesh. *Nirbachito Probandho Sangraha*. Eds. Trandra Chakraborty, Rathin Chakraborty, and Ashoke Chattopadhyay. Kolkata: Natyochinta, 1991.
2. Bandypopadhyay, Shamik. "Teen Poisar Pala : Kichhu Sanshoyer Katha." *Epic Theatre* 14 (date missing).
3. Barua, Mrinal. "Putulkhelar Samiksha." *Bohurupee* 6 (1958): 22-29.
4. Basu, Sushanta. "Anubad Na Bhabanubad?" *Bohurupee* 30 (1968): 26-29.
5. Bharucha, Rustom. *The Politics of Cultural Practice: Thinking Through Theatre in an Age of Globalization*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001.
6. Bhattacharya, Ramkrishna. *Bertolt Brecht: Proyoger Nandantattwa*. Kolkata: Anushtup, 2003.

7. Chakraborty, Amalendu. “Samprotik Bangla Natok: Darshoker Bhabna.” *Bohurupee* 30 (1968): 174-184.
8. Chattopadhyay, Debesh. Ed. *Sansriti* 4. Kolkata. Sept., 2001.
9. Choudhury, Darshan. *Gananatyo Andolan*. Kolkata: Anushtup, 1994.
10. Ghoshal, Dilip. *Gananatyo Ki O Keno*.Kolkata: Ganamon Prakashan, 1987.
11. Gupta, Dhruba. “Ibsener Natok O Bangla Natyo Andolan.” *Bohurupee* 16 (1963): 49-56.
12. Majumdar, Swapan. *Bohurupee 1948-1988*. Kolkata: Bohurupee, 1988.
13. Mensh, Elaine, and Harry Mensh. *Brecht in Two Worlds*. Kolkata: National Publishers, 1981.
14. Mitra, Shombhu. *Kake Bole Natyakala*. Kolkata: Ananda, 1993.
15. Mitra, Shombhu. “Brechter Theatre.” *Bohurupee* 50 (1978): 5-8.
16. Mukhopadhyay, Kuntal. *Theatre and Politics*. Kolkata: Bibhasa, 1999.
17. RoyChowdhury, Subir and Swapan Majumdar, eds. *Bilati Jatra Theke Swadeshi Theatre*. Kolkata: Dey’s Publishing, 1999.
18. Samaddar, Sekhar. “Manobik Mulyabodh O Bangla Natoker Sandhane.” *Shudrak* 9 (1992): 61-74.
19. Sanders, Julie. *Adaptation and Appropriation*. New York: Routledge, 2006.
20. Sarkar, Pabitra. *Natyamancha Natyarup*. Kolkata: Dey’s Publishing, 2004.
21. Sarkar, Pabitra. “Keno Ei Daridrya.” *Bohurupee* 58 (1982): 200-205.
22. Sinha, Pronoti. Ed. *Twentieth Century European Drama*. Santiniketan: D.E.O.M.E.L., 1994.

Internet Sources

1. Banerjee, Arundhuti. “Brecht Adaptations in Modern Bengali Theatre: A Study in Reception.” *Asian Theatre Journal*. 7.1 (Spring 1990). 3 June 2011http://www.jstor.org/stable/1124034.
2. Gunawardana, A J. “Problems and Directions: Calcutta’s New Theatre. A Conversation with Two Critics Dharani Ghosh and Shamik Bandyopadhyay.” *TheDrama Review: TDR*. 15.2 (Spring 1971). 3 June 2011 www.jstor.org/stable/1144645.